

## Chapter 340

### Walkabout

Jason had satisfied himself that his newly refined aura control techniques were adequate. It was now time for a test, which was something Vermillion had devised. That had brought Jason, Vermillion and Farrah to a large shopping centre in Sydney, where they were sat on a bench just inside the entrance.

"I'm not sure this is the best idea," Jason said. "If I don't get this right, the Network won't be happy."

"There has to be a failure condition," Vermillion said. "If there's no pressure, it isn't a proper test of your abilities."

"A gold-ranker can use their aura to pass through a crowd unnoticed," Farrah said. "A high-end silver can do the same, and you're approaching that level of aura strength."

"Strength aside," Jason countered, "I don't actually have a silver-rank aura. Otherwise, I'd be able to levitate."

"Levitation is a capability inherent to silver-rank auras," Farrah said. "What you're attempting here is a matter of strength correctly applied. You're used to masking your aura when you're sneaking around. This is a more sophisticated version of that."

"That's an understatement to the point of being a lie," Jason said.

Farrah had originally trained Jason in the three basic functions of aura control: projecting his aura, retracting his aura and suppressing the auras of others. All aura control techniques were variations or extensions of those three. After Farrah's death, Jason had mostly developed his skills through experience, with only occasional external guidance.

With the experience he had under his belt, plus the assistance of his companions, he had rebuilt his skill set from the ground up, learning to express the three basic functions in more sophisticated ways.

What he was about to attempt was a technique that required the precise and nuanced application of all three functions at once. Firstly, he needed to blend projection and retraction, seemingly contrary effects, to merge his aura into the ambient magic. He had no illusions of matching the Mirror King's achievements in this area, but that had been the inspiration for what he was attempting.

The other – and trickiest – aspect of what he was doing was an application of aura suppression. It needed to be delicate, complex and painstakingly precise as it directly impacted the aura senses of others.

A person's aura senses were largely a function of their aura itself. Even normals could sense auras on some level if the auras were strong and directed enough. For most practical purposes they were aura blind unless someone with aura control didn't want them to be.

After a lengthy discussion with Vermillion on how vampires manipulated auras, Jason had been working on variations of aura suppression that manipulated the aura senses of others, rather than suppressing their whole aura. This was an area in which vampires naturally excelled, while Jason had not realised it was even possible. Farrah had never introduced him to it because essence users could usually only match what a vampire could manage at much higher rank. Jason's absurdly ramped-up aura strength changed that.

He could not directly mimic the techniques of vampires or high-end essence users. Shade had techniques that outstripped both, to the point of being able to confuse digital recordings, but Jason could not match that either. Instead, he blended aspects from all three to develop a bespoke technique tailored to the unusual properties of his unique aura. This was the theme of all his new aura control skills.

The goal of his current activity was to pass through a crowd of normals unnoticed. It was not, strictly speaking, invisibility. Rather, the idea was to prevent the perceptions of others from registering his presence. The crux of the process was enacting the technique while keeping the people he was enacting it upon from noticing. If they sensed his manipulations, the effect would be the exact opposite of the desired outcome.

With his current prowess, Jason was only willing to attempt it with normal people, who were effectively aura blind and had the least chance of sensing what he was doing. Even then, he was far from certain it would work. It would take considerably more practice before he could use it on even freshly-minted iron-rankers like his family.

"Do I have to use the cloak?" he asked. "That seems like asking for trouble."

"We'll only know it's working if you use the cloak," Vermillion said. "Otherwise, they won't know you anyway because you'll just be some guy."

Jason frowned but didn't argue further as he got to his feet. He closed his eyes and extended his senses through his aura, feeling the people around him. Relaxing his body and soul, he let himself become one with his surroundings, his aura blending into the ambient magic. He could feel how inexperienced he still was but he sensed at least a basic level of success.

Next, he started oh-so-delicately affecting the auras around him. Like all applications of aura stealth, it was a deeply inefficient process that took a disproportional level of strength for his aura to operate unnoticed. With such precise work, even Jason's

powerhouse aura was barely able to effectively impact the normal auras around him without it going awry. A month of practise was not enough to act with greater efficiency.

Jason's starlight cloak appeared around him and he started walking through the shopping centre. Despite the starlight rider making his first public appearance in months, not a single person looked his way. On the contrary, their eyes seemed to slide off him, looking elsewhere without registering anything strange.

Shade, for his part, made sure that Jason showed up as no more than a blur on the shopping centre's security cameras. Jason was not sure if he would ever be able to replicate such an ability.

Jason walked the full length of the shopping centre, then went up a level and came back the other way. As a final test, he dropped off the mezzanine and floated down to Farrah and Vermillion, still undetected. His cloak vanished as he sat back on the bench with the others.

"That was good," Vermillion said. "A little too good, in fact."

"Too good?" Jason asked.

Vermillion handed a wad of cash over to Farrah.

"I told you that aura control was his strongest skill," she said.

"You bet on me getting in huge trouble with the Network?" Jason asked Vermillion.

"You don't need to worry," Vermillion said. "The Cabal is happy to step in and cover for you."

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Erika and Ian were hosting the farewell barbecue for Jason's departure. Emi, who normally clung to him like a limpet, was still angry about his leaving again. He could sense her watching him from her bedroom window. The backyard was packed full of friends and family, which made it a mixed bag both in terms of who knew about magic and who Jason wanted to avoid. It had been made very clear that there was to be no talk of magic, although Jason was not confident that would hold up. Once a few more beer kegs were emptied, he expected some slips, but everyone would be blotto by that point anyway.

As Greg and Jason waited their turn to get sausages from one of the grills, Greg leaned close and spoke in a low, conspiratorial voice.

"What's going on with Farrah?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Jason asked.

"I'm pretty sure she got hotter. Like, getting some work done hotter, but didn't disappear long enough to have work done, the way you did."

"I didn't have any work done," Jason said.

“I’ve known you since we were fourteen, Jase. Hormones don’t shave half your chin off.”

Jason gave up trying to respond. After getting his sausage, he left Greg peering suspiciously in Farrah’s direction and made some more rounds of family members.

“G’day, Nanna,” he said to his paternal grandmother, grinning at the glare it earned him. “Sorry, Grandmother.”

“Save your common colloquialisms for your other grandmother,” she said. “She’s classless enough to like them.”

“She’s not a yob, Grandmother. She had Alzheimer’s.”

Grandmother Asano raised her eyebrows at Jason, then glanced over at his other grandmother, chugging a beer.

“Okay,” he acknowledged. “She might be bit of a yob.”

“I don’t suppose you know anything about her miraculous recovery?” Grandmother Asano asked. “Medically, it doesn’t make any kind of sense.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a miracle,” Jason said. “Didn’t you hear what Great Aunt Marjory said?”

“I’d rather listen to the whine of the drill about to lobotomise me than that woman. The results would be essentially the same.”

Jason snorted a laugh, the corners of his grandmother’s lips turning up on her otherwise stern face.

“I don’t suppose you took the time to finally learn Japanese during your mysterious absence?” she asked.

“I might have picked up a few things.”

“Is that so?”

“I wanted to read manga in the original language. Are you a proper One-Punch Man fan, Grandmother, or do you only watch the anime like a prole?”

“You make me wish I’d taken worse care of myself,” she said. “Then I’d have a walking stick to hit you with.”

Jason chuckled as he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

“Don’t be too hard on Hiro while I’m away,” he told her.

“I’ll deal with my reprobate son in whatever means I deem appropriate,” she said.

“Okay, but just remember that he’s doing better,” Jason said. “Don’t be so eager to punish him for his old ways that you push him back into them.”

“And how did you become so wise all of a sudden?” she asked.

“The usual way,” he said. “I made a lot of mistakes.”

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Over the course of the afternoon and into the evening, Jason endured a cavalcade of awkward conversations with distant relatives. Asya was a late arrival and took him aside for some magic-related chat.

"I've been working some bureaucratic wheels," she said. "It took me longer than I liked, but I finally got approval."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"I know it's hard to maintain a friendship when you have to keep almost all of what you do secret," she said. "I had Greg vetted and approved for essences."

"Seriously? How did you get them to swallow that?"

"You going on walkabout has them worried," she said. "They haven't liked not having your looting services during your month of seclusion. If it wasn't for the strike teams Farrah set up doing so well, the Sydney steering committee would be getting downright obstreperous. You're lucky you have Anna on the committee now. She may not love the way you do things but she understands how valuable you are and trusts that you'll be loyal."

"Where does that trust come from?" he asked.

"Me," Asya said.

Jason chuckled.

"I'm guessing the fact that I never really asked much from them is a factor."

"Yes. One they've come to regret, in fact. If you'd gotten more out of them, there'd be more of an obligation to not wander off."

"Funny, that," Jason said. "It's almost like I didn't want to be pinned down."

"I'd appreciate it if you threw the International Committee the occasional bone while you're out and about," Asya said. "There are branches all around the world that would love for you to drop in on their incursions."

"You mean they'd like my looting power to drop in."

"It's a good way to spread some goodwill," Asya said. "If we're extra lucky, having a branch-agnostic running around like Santa Claus might even foster some inter-branch unity."

"No pressure, then. I think I can manage something like that."

He glanced over at Greg, who spotted him and nodded a greeting.

"You'll need to run Greg through your Network program," he said. "I doubt your bosses want me teaching anyone from scratch."

“That’s the idea,” Asya said. “He’s approved for essences but he won’t be cleared to actually get them until he’s been through our welcome to magic induction. We’ll have him ready by the time you get back. You’ll need to supply the essences yourself, by the way.”

He gave her a warm smile.

“Thanks, Asya. You keep going to bat for me, time and again. Don’t think I haven’t noticed. How about you and I do something fun together after I get back?”

“I’d really like that,” she said, flustered.

“I still need to do a few hello and goodbyes,” he said. “I’m going to break the news to Greg, by the way.”

“We’d prefer to do that,” she said.

“I reckon you would,” Jason said.

She snorted a laugh.

“You can be incredibly obnoxious, you know that?”

He responded only with a flashing grin as he wandered off. Greg meandered over and took his place.

“Asked him out yet?” Greg asked her.

“How is that your business?” she asked.

“I started watching you moon over that guy ten years ago,” he said. “He was missing, presumed dead, but then he mysteriously reappears. Now he’s going to vanish again for who knows how long. What does it take for you to make a move, lady?”

“It’s a lot more complicated than you realise. And I don’t exactly see you with a full dance card, Greg.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but I’m the stand by himself in the corner guy. You’re not meant to be here with me.”

“You shouldn’t put yourself down like that,” she said.

“Didn’t you just put me down?”

“That’s why you shouldn’t pile on to yourself.”

“Just give it a few more years of standing in the corner,” Greg said. “Piling onto yourself will be what passes for date night.”

“Ew.”

After making sure he spoke to everyone, Jason made a discreet exit. Most of the people there were less interested in Jason than they were a booze-up anyway, so he was able to grab Greg and slip away unnoticed.

“What’s going on?” Greg asked.

“We’re going for a ride,” Jason said.

“Oh, you need a designated driver.”

“Actually, we don’t need any driver.”

“Oh, do I finally get to see the famous self-driving car? Where do you store that thing? It’s never parked at the marina.”

Jason let out a chuckle.

“Are you ready for your life to be changed forever?” he asked.

“Only since I was fourteen,” Greg said. “What’s going on?”

“Greg, I know you’ve picked up on a strange vibe around me and the people I know.”

“You faked your death and came back under circumstances I’m still not exactly clear on,” Greg said. “I could be in a coma and pick up vibes that strange.”

“Well, tonight’s the night you learn what’s going on.”

“Yeah? Alright, then. What’ve you got?”

“Well,” Jason said. “Let’s start with the fact that magic is real and Asya is part of a secret society that hides it from the world, but she got permission to let me tell you all about it.”

“Okay,” Greg said. “That’s a bit odd. Did someone slip you a baked good of dubious provenance?”

“It wouldn’t do anything,” Jason said. “I’m immune to ordinary drugs.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have vast magic powers,” Jason said. “I’m kind of a warlock ninja. I’ll explain everything, but we start by getting in my car.”

“What car? Seriously, are you on some kind of hallucin…”

Greg trailed off as a cloud of darkness erupted from Jason’s shadow and took the form of a large supercar.

“What the…?”

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“This is your yacht?” Greg asked.

“Yep. I was flying to France with Asya because Farrah was being held by some bad guys—”

“What?”

“Don’t sweat the details; you can ask Asya later. Anyway, someone put a bomb on the plane and it blew up in the air, so—”

“WHAT?”

“If you keep interrupting I’ll never get through this,” Jason said happily, relishing his friend’s flabbergasted state.

“You were in a plane that blew up?”

“Yeah, it was pretty rough, and they had guys waiting for survivors in the water. On this very boat, in fact. So, I dropped down onto the boat and took care of business.”

“You skydived out of an exploding plane?”

“The others skydived; I just dropped down. Magic powers, remember? Anyway, long story short, I beat the guys so badly that when I told them I was taking the boat, they apparently thought I meant literally. They signed it over to me and drove it here after I’d gone off to get Farrah.”

“Jason, every single thing you’ve told me tonight is insane nonsense.”

“I know, believe me. And we’ve only just scratched the surface. You remember the Starlight Rider?”

“Of course I do,” Greg said. “It was all over the television for weeks. Wait, are you saying...?”

“Who’s got two thumbs and killed a bunch of bikers hopped up on vampire blood? This guy.”

Greg shook his head.

“You’ve shown me some crazy things tonight, Jason, but this all sounds like crazy fanfic drivel.”

“I know. I probably should have let Asya and her secret society bring you in easy, but I kind of love just throwing all the madness out there and watching people – in this case, you – slowly realise it’s all true. Come on; I’ll pass you off to Asya and she can help you break it all down.”

Jason opened a portal arch.

“After you, my friend,” he said.

“After me what?” Greg asked.

“I’m taking you back to my sister’s house,” Jason said. “You left your car there and I want to say goodbye. I told everyone I’m leaving tomorrow but I’m heading out tonight. Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you that’s a teleportation gate.”

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After fobbing a somewhat disoriented Greg off on Asya, Jason brought Erika and Emi through the portal to his yacht. Emi stood apart from Jason, glaring at him. He gave her an awkward smile.

“There will come a day, Moppet, when you and I will have grand adventures.”

“Why not now?” she pouted. “You could take me with you.”



“This is something I need to do for myself,” he said. “Only you and Farrah will have Shades with you, so only you two can talk to me whenever you want.”

“You say that like you don’t have a phone,” Emi said.

Jason didn’t make any further progress before Erika said it was time to go and led her daughter back through the portal, leaving Jason alone. He was about to close the portal when Emi barrelled out of it to clasp him in vice clamp hug.

“I love you, Uncle Jason. You have to come back, okay?”

He ruffled her hair.

“I love you too, Moppet.”